

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY RANGOON
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
USLO PEKING
AMCONSUL HONG KONG

S E C R E T SINGAPORE 0981

STADIS////////////////////////////////////

LIMDIS

FOR EA ONLY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, US, XB
SUBJ: U.S. POLICY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA IN POST VIETNAM PERIOD

REFS: A. KUALA LUMPUR 1215; B. JAKARTA 02858

1. I HAD NOT ORIGINALLY INTENDED TO RESPOND TO AMBASSADOR
UNDERHILL'S THOUGHT-PROVOKING COMMENTARY ON U.S. POLICY IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA (REFTEL A), BELIEVING THAT MY EARLIER SUBMISSION
WOULD STAND ON ITS OWN MERITS. HOWEVER, UPON REFLECTION AND AFTER
READING AMBASSADOR NEWSOM'S OBSERVATIONS (REFTEL B), WITH WHICH
I THOROUGHLY AGREE, I BELIEVE A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE PERSPECTIVES

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AS VIEWED FROM SINGAPORE WOULD BE IN ORDER.

2. FIRST, I CHALLENGE AMBASSADOR UNDERHILL'S DESCRIPTION OF
OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS AS "PATER-
NALISTIC". THERE IS IN FACT SOME ELEMENT OF DEPENDENCE ON THEIR
PART, BUT SINCE THE END OF THE VIETNAM WAR ALL HAVE FACED UP
TO NEW REALITIES AND HAVE ADOPTED NEW POLICIES, E.G. ON

STRENGTHENING ASEAN, DESIGNED TO COMPENSATE FOR A MUCH DIMINISHED U.S. ROLE. U.S. POLICY IN MY OPINION ADEQUATELY REFLECTS THIS CHANGE.

3. SECOND, AS FAR AS SINGAPORE IS CONCERNED AMBASSADOR UNDERHILL'S DESCRIPTION OF MOST SEA LEADERS AS TOUGH, AUTHORITARIAN, AND CONFIDENT CERTAINLY DESCRIBES SINGAPORE'S TOP PEOPLE WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR COMMAND OVER THEIR DOMESTIC SITUATION. WHERE IT FALLS DOWN, THOUGH, IS WITH RESPECT TO EXTERNAL FACTORS -- SINGAPORE'S LEADERS ARE VERY MUCH AWARE THAT THEIR MANDATE RESTS ON CONTINUED PROSPERITY AT HOME, WHICH IN TURN DEPENDS ON A STABLE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ORDER BEYOND THEIR CAPACITY TO CONTROL, OR EVEN INFLUENCE VERY MUCH.

4. TO THEM, THE INSURGENCIES IN MALAYSIA AND THAILAND ARE MATTERS OF REAL CONCERN, WITH THE NATIONAL RESILIENCY OF WHICH AMBASSADOR UNDERHILL SPEAKS STILL LACKING TO AN APPRECIABLE DEGREE. THEY SEE THE COMMUNIST STATES OF INDOCHINA, THE SRV IN PARTICULAR, AS IMPLACABLE IF NOT YET PARTICULARLY ACTIVE FOES OF THE EXISTING FREE GOVERNMENTS. THEY SEE THE SOVIET UNION AND THE PRC HOVERING IN THE WINGS WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT TO ASSERT A CLAIM TO HEGEMONY. DESPITE WHAT WE TELL THEM, THEY SEE U.S. INTEREST IN THE REGION DECLINING (INCLUDING U.S. ECONOMIC INTEREST), AND JAPAN'S POTENTIALLY POSITIVE INFLUENCE AS YET UNFORMED. THEY SEE ASEAN AS MOVING TOWARD SOME MEASURE OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL COHESIVENESS WHICH MIGHT HELP OVER TIME TO MITIGATE DESTABILIZING FORCES, BUT WITH PROGRESS SLOWED BY LOCAL NATIONALISM AND PROTECTIONISM. THUS, FAR FROM BEING CONFIDENT ABOUT THE FUTURE, SINGAPORE'S LEADERS ARE VERY WORRIED PEOPLE.

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TM WE OURSELVES MIGHT WISH TO LOOK ON THE BRIGHTER SIDE, AND DOWNGRADE SINGAPORE'S CONCERNS AS BEING OVERDRAWN AND UNNECESSARILY PESSIMISTIC. TO BE SURE, SINGAPOREANS CHARACTERISTICALLY FOLLOW A WORST CASE PHILOSOPHY. NEVERTHELESS, THE FACT THAT SUCH CONCERNS EXIST AND ARE DEEPLY HELD, NOT ONLY IN SINGAPORE BUT ELSEWHERE IN THE REGION, SHOULD NOT BE DISCOUNTED. IT'S ALL VERY WELL TO TELL THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS THAT THEY ARE BIG BOYS NOW AND SHOULD FEND FOR THEMSELVES, BUT WILL THEY BELIEVE US, ESPECIALLY IF WE TAKE ACTIONS WHICH TO THEM APPEAR DESTABILIZING AND APT TO LEAVE THEM AT THE MERCY OF THE BULLY ON THE BLOCK, E.G. BY SIGNIFICANTLY AND ABRUPTLY REDUCING OUR MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS? AS EMBASSY MOSCOW NOTED IN ITS 2954, THE ISSUE MAY BE MORE SYMBOLIC THAN SUBSTANTIVE, BUT THE SOVIETS AND THE ASIANS ALIKE ARE INDEED GOOD AT READING SYMBOLS. ALL THE OTHER THINGS WHICH WE MIGHT DO TO INDICATE A CONTINUING INTEREST IN SOUTHEAST ASIA - TRADE POLICY, COMMODITY AGREEMENTS, CULTURAL EXCHANGES, AND THE LIKE - PALE BEHIND THE SINE QUA NON OF DEMONSTRATING U.S. STAYING POWER. WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT, WE

REMAIN AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN EQUATION.

6. ACCORDINGLY, THE RELATIONSHIP WHICH THE SINGAPORE LEADERS WOULD LIKE WITH US IS VERY SIMILAR TO THAT OUTLINED BY AMBASSADOR NEWSOM FOR THE INDONESIANS: 1) CONTINUED WILL OF THE U.S. TO BALANCE THE SOVIET AND ULTIMATELY THE CHINESE PRESENCE; 2) MILITARY ASSISTANCE (WHICH IN SINGAPORE'S CASE MEANS CONTINUED ACCESS TO MILITARY EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING VIA FMS CASH PURCHASE); AND 3) U.S. PARTICIPATION IN, AND FACILITATION OF, AN ECONOMIC PROGRAM WHICH WILL ENCOURAGE U.S. AND FOREIGN INVESTMENT (ESPECIALLY JAPANESE) IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROVIDE MARKETS FOR SINGAPORE AND ASEAN PRODUCTS.

7. I BELIEVE AMBASSADOR UNDERHILL IS UNDULY HARSH ON THE SCORE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW OUR LEAD OR TO CONTRIBUTE TO U.S. INTERESTS IN INTERNATIONAL ISSUES. SINGAPORE, FOR ONE, HAS BEEN HELPFUL ON THE QUESTIONS OF KOREA, GUAM, SAMOA,
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PUERTO RICO, AND ISRAEL, IN BOTH THE NONALIGNED MOVEMENT AND THE UNGA, AS WELL AS ON CERTAIN LAW OF THE SEA QUESTIONS. THE "HOSPITALITY" WHICH IT OFFERS TO THE SOVIETS IS ESSENTIALLY ON A CASH-DOWN BASIS, AND IN NO WAY EQUATES TO THE ADVANTAGES WHICH WE RECEIVE. IT HAS CONSISTENTLY REFUSED TO PERMIT THE SOVIETS TO ESTABLISH OIL-STORAGE FACILITIES HERE (WHICH WE, INCIDENTALLY, ENJOY VIA THE UK) AND ALL BUNKERING AND SUPPLYING OF SOVIET SHIPS ARE AT STRICTLY COMMERCIAL RATES. SINGAPORE ALLOWS SOVIET ECONOMIC ACTIVITY UNDER CLOSE REGULATION, BUT POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES ARE NEGLIGIBLE. THE SOVIETS CANNOT BE KEPT OUT OF THE REGION, AND THIS IS ACCEPTED BY SINGAPORE, BUT THEY ARE DISTRUSTED AND HELD AT ARMS LENGTH. WHAT SOLUTIONS SINGAPORE MIGHT SEEK WITHOUT OUR PRESENCE IS HARD TO PREDICT, BUT WE CANNOT ASSUME THAT OUR BEST INTERESTS WOULD BENEFIT. I DO NOT DOUBT THAT THE SAME SITUATION PREVAILS ELSEWHERE IN THE REGION. HOLDRIDGE

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